

## Monumentalization in the Age of Digital Media

### Abstract

Although the emergent field of memory studies is still hugely influenced by the concept of 'collective memory', this concept is now challenged by the theoretical demands of the new, post-broadcast age, with its contingencies and complexities of connectivity. (Hoskins) With the increasing dominance of the new media, memory studies need a critical re-evaluation of the influence of digital mass communication on individual memory, collective memory and monumentalization of the narrative and images representing certain events.

By applying the principle of Hoskins' 'connective memory' to an example of memorial culture of the former Yugoslavia, the essay will compare the media treatment of the political narratives and its physical representations in memorial culture within the principles and concepts of 'collective memory' and 'connective memory'.

"It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories"<sup>1</sup> According to Halbwachs, society forms a collective memory that is dependent upon the framework within which a group is situated in. Collective memory exists outside of and lives beyond the individual memory, while the individual's understanding of the past is strongly connected to the group consciousness.

Collective memory has an important function and makes a high-stake between the social and political parties in every society since it preserves and transfers society's cultural capital, its identity, coherence and therefore its existence.

Collective memory can serve as an instrument of power and change the ways in which events are remembered and recorded, or discarded. Politics built on ideological grounds often play a strong role in shaping of collective memory. This kind of a political interference often causes remembrances to slightly or even markedly differ from the objective truth. Government policies, as well as social rules and popular culture influence the way events are remembered.

A memorial culture shaped by the ideological political structures is clearly visible in the treatment and presentation of the World War II memories in former Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia.

"In multicultural Yugoslavia, the Second World War was a layered and ambiguous situation. Not only a war of liberation against the aggressor Nazi Germany, it was also a civil war with complex oppositions between ethnic population groups who fought one another from different points on the ideological spectrum, such as the Partisans, the Ustaše and the Chetniks."<sup>4</sup>

Once the WWII was over, the former ideological opponents had to collectively form a new country, the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. This resulted in a neutral position of the official policy line that was supposed to assure the bright future of the socialistic model society and smooth over all its former conflicts. This kind of politics often implies all kinds of modification, simplification or even concealment of the certain narratives.

The collective memory of a nation is represented by the memorials it chooses to erect, and the politics of the memorial culture closely follows the politics and treatment of the narrative. The memorial culture of the former Yugoslavia is represented through structures that were commissioned by Josip Broz Tito, former Yugoslavian president, in the 1960s and 1970s to commemorate sites where WWII battles took place, or where concentration camps once stood and is a perfect visualization of the neutral politics led in that period.

"For the reason of the reconciliation or even concealment of the former conflicts, the war monuments couldn't feature neither a heroic nor patriotic elements. They had to be neutral enough to be acceptable to both victims and perpetrators."<sup>4</sup>

This is why the monuments adopted a neutral, almost frivolous visual language. Their forms are completely abstract, devoid of the cult of personality that is often found in the monuments of the ideological regimes.

There were once hundreds of them scattered throughout villages and rural deserted landscapes representing power, confidence and strength of Yugoslavia. They are (were) usually of gigantic scale and designed by different Yugoslavian sculptors and architects.

Up until the 1990s, they attracted millions of visitors, schoolchildren (young pioneers), military veterans, patriots, politicians, and mourners who had lost family in the WWII. The images reproduced in the mass media confirmed their strength and beauty even to the citizens that couldn't experience them by standing in front of them. They embodied all the values that the socialist country stood for, but only until the ideology supporting system collapsed.

"Many commentators on the war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s thus declared that the events unfolding were the inevitable extension of the Second World War. The fury unleashed upon the Spomeniks after 1992 was not merely settling the score with the old socialist system, but was also the exposure of that hidden history which had led to the reopening of Pandora's box in the first place."<sup>4</sup>

Collective memory driven by political ideologies, produced through social, educational, memorial and other infrastructure and delivered through one-way mass media, directly or indirectly, leaves no space for the individual thought, while the collective narratives are easy to preserve and monumentalize.

More than 20 years after the country dissolved, the narratives of the WWII are still active, but this time set in a completely different context. Not only that the political context significantly changed, but the technological and media infrastructure now offer a more dynamic and diffused model of mediation. Re-consumation of the past events and conflicts emerges in both appropriate and inappropriate media space, as its democratization makes it more available and widespread. The subject of the WWII and its consequences are being re-consumed not only by the mainstream media formats, but is also initiated by the individual citizens on everyday bases.

"In place of a top-down, one-to-many vertical cascade from centralised industry sources we discover today bottom-up, many-to-many, horizontal, peer-to-peer communication. 'Pull' media challenge 'push' media; open structures challenge hierarchical structures; micro-production challenges macro-production; open-access amateur production challenges closed access, elite-professions; economic and technological barriers to media production are transformed by cheap, democratised, easy-to-use technologies."<sup>5</sup>

In our media age - and particularly during the last decade of increasing digitalization - this generates a flow of, and production of, second hand memories. Particular narratives and images are reproduced and reframed, yet also questioned and contested through new images and so forth.

"New media machinery, driven by the availability, portability and pervasiveness of digital devices converges with a memorial culture determined to re-consume past conflicts and catastrophes."

In his essay '7/7 and connective memory: Interactional trajectories of remembering in post-scarcity culture' Andrew Hoskins is introducing a model of "connective memory" according to which the individual memory is generated through the series of contacts between people, digital technologies and media, rather than as product of individual or collective remembrances.

According to Andrew Hoskins, in the age of compulsive culture of digitalization and archiving, a different kind of mass has been developing. "The new mass is constituted through its connectivity, rather than 'collectivity', and thus doesn't 'possess' collective memory in a way that traditional models of 'the audience' and 'mass media' have been attributed such a condition (cf. Dayan and Katz, 1992)."<sup>1</sup>

Events that are subjected to this kind of media treatment are the ones that "...acquired a substantial and recognizable memorial status in terms of the relative extent of their ongoing presence in media-public discourses as signifying a particular relevance and meaning in 'memory' to a given community of persons."<sup>1</sup>

However, despite the today's mainstream media monumentalization of certain images and narra-

tives, the meanings of recycled news data perpetuates space for speculations and contestations around personal and political narratives on the events.

Drip-by-drip remediations in the mainstream media, as well as in the alternative media formats as news portal commenting space, forums and even YouTube comments or other social media, are opening space for speculations and contestations around personal and political narratives on the events in question. This is all opposing to the monumentalization of the narrative. As opposed to the monopolization of the media space and the truth, the digital technologies had led to democratization of the media which now allows millions of versions of the truth. Each time one is confronted with one of those truths, an opportunity for a memory modification. "The continual emergence of sets of 'new' pasts, a 'new memory' challenges unified or unifying 'collective' orientations to the past."<sup>1</sup>

The moment of confrontation Hoskins defines as the 'connective turn'. "The connective turn is the massively increased abundance, pervasiveness and accessibility of digital technologies, devices and media, shaping an ongoing re-calibration of time, space (and place) and memory by people as they connect with, inhabit and constitute increasingly both dense and diffused social networks."<sup>1</sup>

One could say that the everyday emergence of the 'new truths' and 'new memory' serves as a very powerful tool for demonumentalization of the past and present narratives in a certain society.

The mediation and re-mediation of the past events is even more diffused and unpredictable when dealing with images. While The New Media connectivity is processing the narratives of the WWII in one way, the memory of its physical embodiment, the monuments is experiencing a demonumentalization by decontextualization.

After the Republic dissolved and was torn by nationalist and ethnic violence in early 1990's, the monuments that were meant to endure and to resist the transiency of time were completely abandoned, rarely visited and left there to decompose and rot. They stand unknown by the younger generations and are neglected by the older. Their symbolism is fading as is the memory in the collective mind of their host cultures.

Yet, while being completely ignored by the political structures and the peoples of the former Yugoslavia, the monuments became quite famous only because of the interest of a relatively small group of people outside of the former Yugoslavia - designers, photographers and other visual artists and blog consumers.

In only few months the word 'Spomenik' (meaning monument in languages of the former Yugoslavia) gain a completely new meaning. When used as a Google search term gives by far more articles and pictures coming from international WEB pages and blogs (in english mostly). The word is even grammatically treated as a word coming from the english language (i. e. 'spomeniks', referring to the plural of 'spomenik').

The reason for this is "Spomenik: The End of History", a book by Belgian photographer Jan Kempenaers that presents series of 26 photographs of 25 monuments of former Yugoslavia, that has become widely known in artistic and design circles through various blogs and art/design magazines. Kempenaers toured around the ex-Yugoslavia region from 2006 to 2009, but with the help of a 1975 map of memorials.

"They have become submerged in a new age, rendered unintelligible to the current generation. Their symbolism has been lost in translation as the visual language has changed, their signals muffled by a shifted worldview. The monuments have been the objects of blind fury and now, of indifference. What remains is pure sculpture in a desolate landscape."<sup>3</sup>

The particular selection of photos, set side by side in a big format book, communicates something completely different than each of them would communicate separately. They are all shot in the same time of the day, from a human perspective, without people present. Widely distributed images of the 'Spomeniks' in this appearance and form decontextualizes their meaning degrading its symbolics to one of a dissolved country ("It is the memory of the socialist party that is all over now. And yet, this is precisely what enriches the monuments' meaning. In their dilapidated condition, they are no longer symbols of victory, but for the first time, true symbols of a newfound mourning."<sup>4</sup>) or even to the level of pure aesthetic value ("Looking at the photographs one must

admit to a certain embarrassment. We see the powerful beauty of the monumental sculptures and we catch ourselves forgetting the victims in whose name they were built.“<sup>4</sup>).

What is their meaning now, what are they communicating? On one hand, their physical condition and institutional neglect reflect a more general social historical fracturing now when their original ideologically driven meaning is no longer intelligible. And on the other hand, they are still of stunning beauty without any symbolic significances that communicates nothing but their aesthetic values (i. e. some blogs are referring to the monuments as the ‘25 Abandoned Yugoslavia Monuments that look like they’re from the Future’).

The digital media that produce, reproduce, and remediate digital content, contribute to a more fluid, diffused and unpredictable media/memory ecology that results with the interpenetrations that can shape different and competing narratives. In this way the digital mass audience can influence the demonumentalization of the subject in question. The narrative of the second WWII is now available to thousands of active narrators, while the images representing the events and ideology get more disconnected from the original context which results with demonumentalize of the subject in question.

## Bibliography

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